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EPA to add asbestos-tainted Montana town to Superfund list

Tuesday, February 26, 2002

By CHRISTOPHER THORNE
THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

WASHINGTON -- The Environmental Protection Agency on Tuesday agreed to name the asbestos-tainted town of Libby to the national Superfund list as the most significant hazardous site in Montana.

The so-called "silver bullet" designation -- each state is allowed to name one such "most significant" place for Superfund listing -- automatically makes Libby one of the EPA's top 100 Superfund priorities.

Gov. Judy Martz made the request to the EPA in January to help with cleaning up contamination from the now-defunct vermiculite mine there. W.R. Grace & Co. operated the mine, which is being blamed for nearly 200 deaths and health problems of hundreds of other area residents.

Newspaper reports in 1999 first linked health problems in Libby to the mine, which closed in 1990.

The mine's vermiculite ore, which was used to make household products including insulation, contained harmful tremolite asbestos. The vermiculite also was used around town, including as a running surface on a school track.

Tuesday's action, the publishing of a notice in the Federal Register, was the EPA's first formal step before it will recognize Libby as a Superfund site. The agency will accept public comment on the proposal for 60 days, with a final decision expected some time during the summer.

The National Priorities List contains the known sites in the United States of hazardous substances, pollutants and contaminants. Including Libby, there are 1,222 sites on the list.

Over the past two years, the EPA has spent \$32 million testing areas around town, removing soil and inspecting waste from the mine. Cleanup



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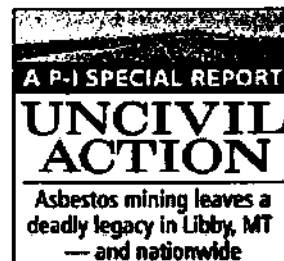


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of the town is expected to take about three years. However, that does not include any potential cleanup of the mine, which would take longer.

By naming the town to the Superfund list, Montana's share of the cleanup costs would be no more than 10 percent. Early EPA estimates outline a likely state bill of about \$3 million to \$5 million.

On the Net:

Federal Register: www.access.gpo.gov/su_docs/aces/aces140.html

EPA's Libby Web site: www.epa.gov/region08/superfund/libby/

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